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ABSTRACT

The problem of food and drink in libraries and the potential damage to library materials that may occur have always been troublesome issues. Most attempts to totally eliminate food and drink have produced mixed results at best and libraries have expended precious staff time trying to enforce such rules. The food and drink issue is particularly difficult for academic libraries because students and faculty members often spend long hours studying or doing research in the library. Students with little time to spare have found the need to carry nourishment with them and consume it while doing their work in the library. Traditional bans on food and drink consumption in academic libraries are gradually giving way in some institutions to more tolerant policies and practices. Factors influencing this change include changing expectations of library patrons, new customer service and quality philosophies, new pest control technologies and continuing pressures to maximize the productivity of library staff. The University Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha modified its policy toward food and drink with positive results. The Library's experiences demonstrate the pressures leading to change and the practical aspects of communicating, implementing, and enforcing a less restrictive food and drink policy. (Author)

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The Endless Picnic: Changing Food and Drink Policies in Academic Libraries

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by

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ABSTRACT

Traditional bans on food and drink consumption in academic libraries are gradually giving way in some institutions to more tolerant policies and practices. Factors influencing this change include changing expectations of library patrons, new customer service and quality philosophies, new pest control technologies and continuing pressures to maximize the productivity of library staff. The University Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha recently modified its policy toward food and drink with positive results. The Library's experiences demonstrate the pressures leading to change and the practical aspects of communicating, implementing, and enforcing a less restrictive food and drink policy.

The problem of food and drink in libraries and the potential damage to library materials that may occur have always been troublesome issues. Most attempts to totally eliminate food and drink have produced mixed results at best and libraries have expended precious staff time trying to enforce such rules. The food and drink issue is particularly difficult for academic libraries because students and faculty members often spend long hours studying or doing research in the library. Students with little time to spare have found the need to carry nourishment with them and consume it while doing their work in the library.

Solutions Attempted

Libraries have tried many ways to eliminate the food and drink problem. They have checked people at the door and

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confiscated food and drink as patrons enter the building. There have been elaborate campaigns educating students about the harm that food and drink can do to library materials and the pests that breed from edible residues left in the stacks. Food and drink patrols have been formed to check the library at stated intervals and remove food and drink discovered. A few libraries have instituted fines for violators. Some libraries have developed escalating penalties for violators that start with reminders and end with the loss of library privileges. All of these solutions have required a great deal of effort on the part of the library staff and the results have usually been only partially successful.

Difficulties in Maintaining "No Food & Drink" Policies

Maintaining a strict "no food or drink" policy requires the cooperation of the entire library staff and that is unlikely to happen in most libraries. Staff members prefer to avoid conflict. Approaching a patron and suggesting that a rule is being broken, is not something most of them are willing to do. Delegating this task to a few staff members or to students assistants makes it an impossible task. The designated staff become frustrated and begin to resent others who refuse to enforce the policy. Enforcement can be very expensive at a time when salary dollars are shrinking and demands for better and faster service are rapidly increasing in the majority of academic libraries. The "no food or drink" policy makes it difficult for staff members

who must hide beverages that they wish to take to their desks. Librarians love food and food events such as pot lucks or birthday celebrations. These functions become a problem for the staff if food and drink are "officially" not allowed. Customers quickly become aware if library staff members are allowed to have food and drink and that privilege is denied to them.

The problem of food and drink in the library really has no easy solution. No matter how many signs you post or how many patrols you send out, students will still want their coffee or pop in the library. Libraries compound this problem by not allowing certain materials to circulate so the customer really has no choice but to spend considerable amounts of time in the library.

Policies of Academic Libraries

A search of the literature located only a few items dealing directly with food and drink. The University Libraries at Pennsylvania State University launched a campaign to eliminate food and drink in 1991-92 that was considered a success.[1] South Dakota State University conducted a survey of 99 libraries in five surrounding states and found that most libraries restricted food and drink but among the 12% that allowed food/drink the policy caused no problems in 58% of the libraries and the problems were minor in another 33%.[2]

During March 1996 a search was done on library home pages to examine their "Food and Drink" policies. A message was also sent out on the CIRCPLUS listserv asking about policies. The responses were very interesting. Many libraries still maintain strict prohibitions on food and drink but other are beginning to loosen the policies or at least allow food/drink in restricted areas. Drinks in covered containers were also allowed in many libraries. Niagara University Library has a particularly relevant policy and it is printed with permission from Leslie R. Morris, Director of Libraries, Niagara University.[3]

Niagara University Library

Enlightened Food, Beverage and Tobacco Policy

BEVERAGES

Coffee, soft drinks, bottled water, etc., may be brought into and consumed in the Library. Maximum size is one liter containers. No alcoholic beverages are permitted. No beverages may be placed on or consumed within five feet of terminals, keyboards, copy machines or other mechanical devices. Patrons are responsible for any repairs caused by drinks spilled on terminals, keyboards, copy machines, etc. Please place empty containers in the proper receptacles.

FOOD

Snacks consisting of gum, fruit, small bags of cookies, candy or chips are permitted. The Library reserves the right to decide which foods are permitted.

Please do NOT eat your lunch or dinner in the Library. Sandwiches, pizzas, tacos, french fries, chicken and any thing else that could be considered lunch or dinner is forbidden. Clean up your mess. Please place all refuse in appropriate containers.

Although snacks and beverages are permitted in the Library, patrons should be considerate of other patrons, library materials and equipment. If you spill liquids on tables or floors, go to the rest room, bring back paper towels and clean the mess in consideration of other library users. There are no janitors on duty until after midnight on weekdays and none at all on weekends.

TOBACCO

Smoking is confined to the Smoking Lounge on the second floor. Chewing and snuffing is prohibited anywhere in the Library. Upon discovery of chewing, snuffing anywhere in the Library or smoking outside the Smoking Lounge, Campus Safety will be contacted.

Thank you for your kind cooperation.

Expectations of library customers

Expectations are changing. Many of the new bookstores such as Barnes & Noble have coffee bars in their stores. They allow customers to browse for potential purchases while enjoying a cappuccino. A fair number of libraries also have cafeterias or restaurants either in them or in close proximity. Students, faculty, and other users of the library expect to be able to find a comfortable spot, organize their work, and settle in with a nice beverage of their choice.

A recent television commercial asked, "How does librarian Harriet Causby eat a Reese's?" Librarian Harriet Causby is shown sitting at her desk, surrounded by books, a large sign above her desk enjoining "quiet". Harriet carefully unwraps her candy bar and takes a small bite. As she nibbles, the sign comes loose at one end and swings from side to side with loud creeks before crashing to the floor. Harriet looks nonplussed, but resumes eating her candy bar. The initial question is answered: "very, very quietly."

This commercial, along with other commercials and scenes in the popular media, indicates that society has a clear expectation that libraries will be "quiet" but that no comparable expectations regarding food and drink exist. The experience of the University of Nebraska at Omaha with food and drink suggests that these social expectations impact the effectiveness of the most common regulations found in academic libraries.

The Situation at UNO

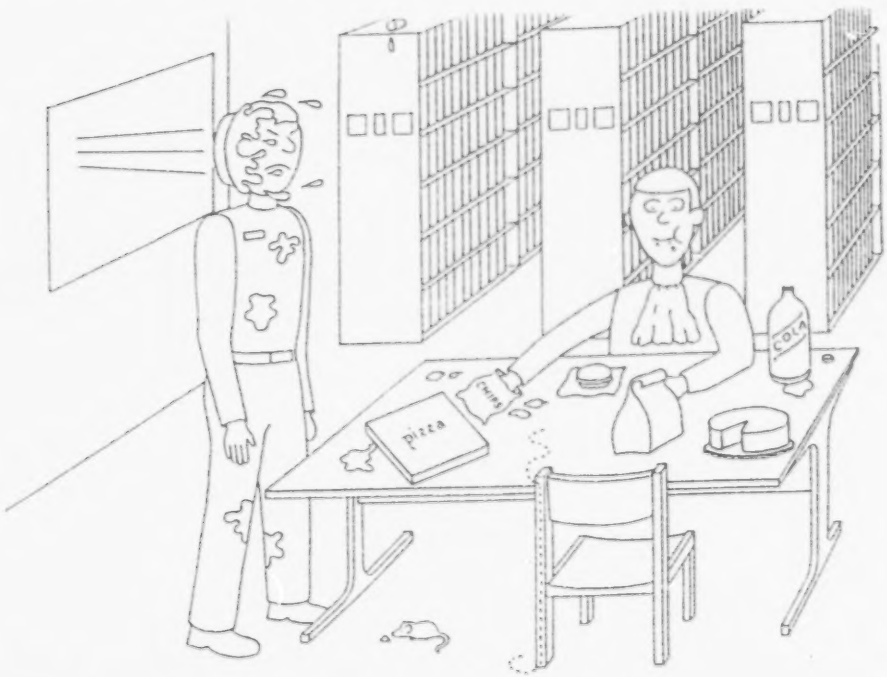
In 1986, the present Building Manager was charged with resolving two "patron problems" - those of noise and food and drink. Both problems were considered to be on-going, intractable or possibly not susceptible to any solution. The problems have been solved but probably not in the manner that was envisioned in 1986. The solutions that worked indicated that patrons will comply with policies and regulations that match their expectations but they will not comply with regulations that do not meet their expectations or satisfy their needs.

The University Library had taken a primarily "informational approach" to resolving these problems. There were literally hundreds of signs, including prominent signage at the door, which declared "quiet is expected" and "no food or drink allowed." In addition, regular building patrols by one to three staff members were conducted during which violators were informed of the policies and compliance was requested. Despite these efforts, the problem behaviors flourished.

The noise problem was resolved rather easily since our physical layout could be configured to meet both patron expectations and needs. An entire floor of the Library, well removed from the hustle and bustle of the main entry and public service areas, was designated as "quiet study only" while another floor was designated for "conversation and group study." This solution, arrived at primarily

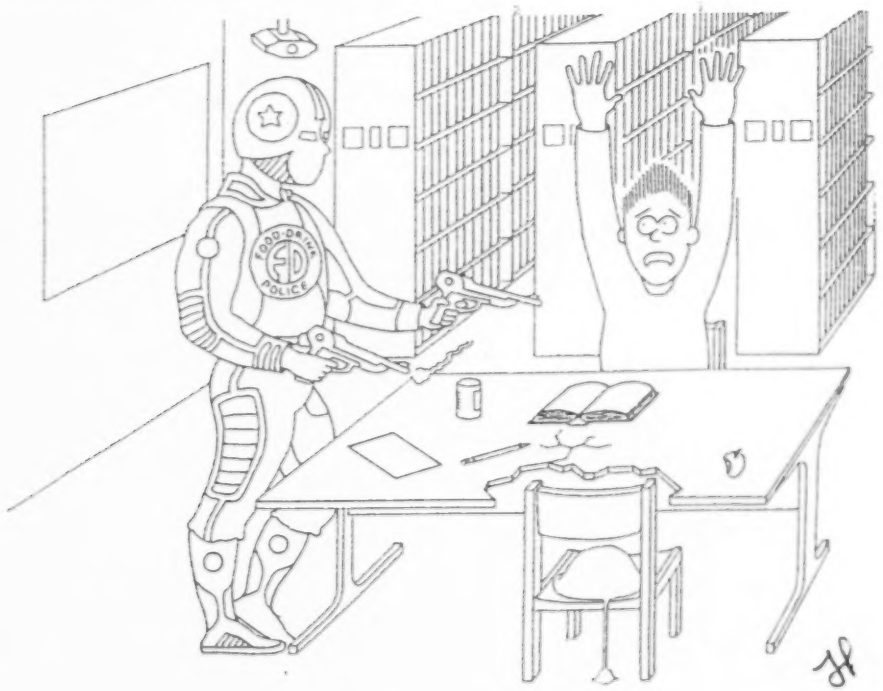
through *listening* to patrons, worked because many patrons desired a quiet area and all of them expected such an area to be available. We also *met the need that patrons felt* for conversation, group study, and the social activities that college students viewed as part of the "academic experience."

Although the noise problem was solved, the food and drink policies were ineffective. The library staff saw food and drink as the problem and the patrons viewed enforcement attempts as the problem. By listening to patrons and observing their behavior it became apparent that the heart of the problem was a conflict of needs and expectations, all of which were legitimate.



THE FEARS OF LIBRARY STAFF

On one side of the conflict were library faculty and staff who had a strong concern for preservation and protection of the collection. Library staff also had, however, a legitimate desire for comfort and convenience in their workplace. They wanted to have coffee, snacks, and pop at their desks. The staff also wished to have social events and public service programs within the library that included food and drink. The staff had a desire to avoid conflict. The Library and University administration had engendered a strong public service ethos and provided customer service training that taught how to avoid unnecessary conflict with customers. Consequently, staff found it difficult to assume a role that conflicted with their service training.



THE PERCEPTIONS OF LIBRARY PATRONS

On the other side of the conflict were the patrons. They had a strong desire for comfort and convenience while they studied. The UNO campus provides limited options for quiet study spaces and library patrons quite legitimately wanted a cup of coffee or a can of pop while they worked. The patrons also had a strong desire to be treated fairly. Library staff failed to realize the extent to which patrons were aware of the staff "exception" to the food and drink rules. And patrons, like staff, had a strong desire to avoid conflict. They exhibited considerable resentment at being interrupted while studying by a staff member enforcing the food and drink exclusion.

Caught between these conflicting expectations were the few staff members charged with enforcement. They perceived that they received no support from other staff and regarded the expectations and behavior of their co-workers as part of the problem. They also were criticized by patrons who did not understand why they were bound by rules that the staff flouted.

Analyzing the costs of the Food and Drink ban

During the spring of 1994, a concerted study was made of food and drink violations, largely in response to the complaints of those staff charged with enforcing the rule, who were experiencing considerable frustration with the task. The study concluded: "*...the regulations banning food and drink from the Library are ineffective. Our efforts at enforcement are unproductive and are generating*

antagonism among patrons and demoralizing those staff charged with enforcing the regulation."

This study also identified the costs of the existing policy as:

1. *A direct monetary cost* of approximately $8,000 per year in staff time, largely in the form of the daily enforcement patrols.

2. *A considerable negative impact on "goodwill."* Goodwill was defined in a business sense in which the goodwill of customers is recognized as a tangible asset of an institution. The University of Nebraska at Omaha faces an increasingly competitive situation for students and the current policy generated a negative customer service impact.

3. *No impact on pest control.* Since food and drink were *already* so widely distributed in the building by staff, the University's environmental services unit was already providing complete and regular pest control services. Contemporary pest treatment technologies and products, such as Gencor, had already eliminated the most objectionable aspects of regular pest treatment (spraying, chemical odors, etc.)

4. *Unknown cost avoidance on damage to materials and furnishings.* This cost of the policy could not be clearly assessed. Although there was an assumption that a permissive policy would increase damage to materials and furnishings, this was unproven and subject to question. For example, patrons already use our materials at home and presumably don't refrain from food and drink while doing so. If appropriate trash and recycling containers were provided, would people use them? Food and drink were frequently "hidden" by patrons in the Library and many spills were due to accidents while concealing the beverages under tables and chairs.

Experimental Policy

In the fall of 1994, "covered drinks only" were allowed in a limited area of the building as part of a well-publicized experimental policy. Library furniture was moved to clearly define the area where covered drinks were permitted. Signs at the entrance to the area were erected

to explain what was and what was not allowed. Trash cans with liners and recycling bins were placed in the area. Patrons discovered in other parts of the Library with beverages were encouraged to move to the designated area.

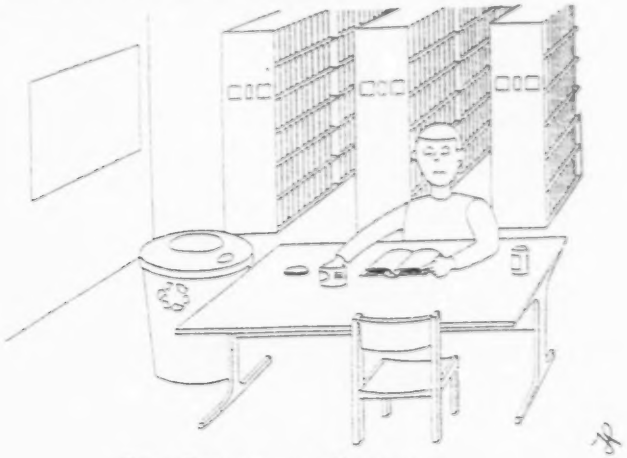
Due to the popularity of the new policy and crowding in the designated area, a larger area was designed to allow covered drinks during the spring semester. After much discussion, pop cans were also allowed as well as covered containers. As a result of the experimental policy, costs shifted positively:

1. *Direct monetary costs had been reduced* considerably since the area being patrolled was smaller.

2. *Goodwill increased significantly*. Patrons were pleased with the policy options and they were more positively disposed toward library staff and to the Library because their needs were being met.

3. *No impact on pest control costs.*

4. *Maintenance costs on materials and furnishings were reduced.* Cleanliness improved significantly. No increased spills or trash buildup occurred. Most, but not all, patrons cleaned up after themselves and the appropriate trash containers made a significant difference. Cans of pop and candy bar wrappers were no longer found in the stacks.



THE POLICY IN PRACTICE

New Policy Adopted

In the spring of 1996, the University of Nebraska at Omaha Library adopted the present policy which extended the "drink area" to include most of the building. The present policy protects electronic and photocopy equipment and continues to exclude food and drink of any kind from the Special Collections and Archival areas. Certain foods are excluded that have an impact on *other* library patrons such as hot foods which smell and "messy" foods such as sunflower seeds or shelled peanuts. The "no food allowed" rule is not enforced for snack foods, gum, hard candy, and the like that are not smelly or messy. The new policy is as follows:

FOOD, DRINK, SMOKING

Source: Administrative Office Effective: 12-90 Revised: 1-17-96

FOOD AND DRINK

Covered drinks and canned pop are allowed in the Library except at electronic workstations, at copy machines and within the collection rooms of Special Collections and University Archives.

Food is not allowed in the public access areas of the Library. Enforcement will be limited to instances of messy or hot foods. Examples of messy and hot foods include, but are not limited to, fast food items, pizza, popcorn, sunflower seeds, and peanuts in the shell.

Exceptions to rules governing food and drink are made for business and social functions schedules in Room 205, the Staff Lounge and departmental work areas.

SMOKING and TOBACCO

The University Library is a smoke-free building. No smoking is allowed anywhere within the building. No tobacco chewing or spitting is allowed in the Library.

Conclusion

Easing of food and drink restrictions is happening in many academic libraries. However, no two libraries are in precisely the same circumstances. We would like to emphasize that the solution we developed was appropriate for the University of Nebraska at Omaha. We hope that it suggests possibilities or approaches for your situation.

References

[1]Clement, Elaine and Patricia A. Scott. "No Food, No Drink, No Noise." *C&RL News* 55, no. 2 (February 1994): 81-83.

[2]Richards, Susan L. and Lisa F. Lister. "An Exploration of Vandalism/Food/Drink Issues in Academic Libraries" in *Kaleidoscope: Joint Conference of the Arizona State Library Association, Mountain Plains Library Association, and the Arizona Education Media Association. Proceedings of the Research Forum Phoenix, Arizona, October 29-November 2, 1991*, ed. Carol Hammond. Emporia, Ks: Emporia State University, 1984, ERIC, Ed 349017.

[3]Accessible on the world wide web: http://www.niagara.edu/~library/food.html

Acknowledgements

Drawings courtesy of James A. Petrich, University of Nebraska at Omaha Library.

We appreciate all of the respondents to our inquiries about food and drink policies in libraries.